

## THE INTERNATIONAL LABOUR MOVEMENT IN THE AMERICAS: A RESEARCH AGENDA

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The international labour movement is as old as modern domestic labour movements. Since their origins in the late 19th century, trade unions have built international links, which soon became formal institutions. Today, International Labour Movement Organizations (ILMOs) can be classified into two categories: political ILMOs, whose affiliates are national trade union centres, that are mostly involved in political representation, in particular to the UN and its agencies; and sectoral ILMOs, whose affiliates are branch-based or occupation-based unions, that are concerned with industry-specific issues and are vehicles for intervention with Multinational Corporations (MNCs).

### RAISING QUESTIONS ABOUT INTERNATIONAL UNIONISM IN THE AMERICAS

Three main political ILMOs have co-existed until recently: the World Confederation of Labour (WCL, Christian-oriented, founded in 1920), the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU, now communist-led, founded in 1945) and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU, social-democrat, founded in 1949 out of a split from the WFTU). During the Cold War, these three organizations were very much involved in an East-West dynamic. The WFTU and the ICFTU, in particular, were considered as puppets of their respective camps in the world of labour (Gordon 2000, Moody 1997). With the fall of the USSR and its allies, the WFTU was considerably weakened and many now consider it a dying organization. The membership of the WCL has also suffered from the rising tendency of secularization among denominational unions. Both phenomena have led to the increase of the ICFTU's membership and to the foundation, in November 2006, of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), which is actually a merger between the WCL and the ICFTU.

Hence, the dynamic among political ILMOs has entered a new phase with the end of the Cold War. The ICFTU-ITUC has become an almost hegemonic organization (Eder 2002, Gordon 2000) but it is also confronted with the massive arrival of new members, coming from a variety of geopolitical backgrounds, as

well as a crisis in trade union representation in most of the historically dominant member nations, including the United States. New members from the global south, in particular, are likely to challenge the usually moderate political line of the ICFTU-ITUC. Also, the fact that the ICFTU was built on the bottom-up Anglo-American model<sup>1</sup> (i.e., with a fairly light structure at the top with little influence on its affiliates), challenges the capacity of the leadership to foster change. This highlights the necessity to question the impact of the end of the Cold War on ILMOs. Did it 'thaw' ILMOs as it did for some nation-states? How did it change the way ILMOs work? How did it influence their political project? And what does this new apparent unity bring to organized labour?

As for sectoral ILMOs, the situation used to vary depending on the political ILMO they were related to. Both the WCL and the WFTU had their own branch-based federations, while the ICFTU did not. The main reason for this is that it has always maintained a close relationship with the Global Union Federations (GUFs, formerly known as International Trade Secretariats, ITSs). Ten GUFs exist today with a variety of sizes and structures. Like the ITUC, they are now considered as the almost hegemonic sectoral ILMOs and some of them are engaged in a process of mergers with former WCL federations. Although not formally affiliated to the ITUC, they are associated and have signed a cooperation agreement with it. This is the logical continuation of the unofficial 'division of labour' maintained between GUFs and the ICFTU since the 1960s and known as the 'Milan agreement' (Gordon 2000).

GUFs focus their efforts on MNCs and in response to the process of globalization have adopted since the 1990s the practice of Global Framework Agreements (GFAs) through which they try to impose minimum labour standards on multinational employers (Fairbrother and Hammer 2005). Another consequence of the evolution of the production process is the rising tendency toward mergers between different GUFs whose members work in the same area. More and more GUFs are becoming multi-sectoral, covering a wide range of industries, and thus potentially competing with each other or even competing with the ITUC. The two most recent examples are the creation of the International Federation of Chemistry, Energy, Mine and General Workers' Unions (ICEM, founded in 1995) and of the Union Network International (UNI, skills and services workers, founded in 2000). Therefore, the re-organization of the production process and of industrial relations that comes with neoliberal globalization has strong impacts on ILMOs that should be investigated. For example, what kind of responses do ILMOs offer to this process? How does this affect their practices and their structures? How can the efficiency of these reactions be evaluated?

Europe is probably the most researched continent with respect to ILMOs (see Hyman 2005b). Indeed, it is home to the headquarters of all the important ILMOs and it is the cradle of modern unionism. By opposition, the Americas are

understudied by scholars interested in ILMOs. Nevertheless, both the ITUC and the ten GUFs have a number of affiliates on the continent. Almost all of them even maintain a Panamerican branch that gather their affiliates in the Americas. The history of the international labour movement here has also been strongly influenced by the Cold War. Indeed, the ORIT, ICFTU's Panamerican branch, was known for being dominated by the American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), i.e. a strong anticommunist organization strictly aligned with (and funded by) the US government. To that end, the now defunct American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) played a central role (Battista 2002, Roberts 1995, Spalding 1992). Through its funding programmes and its offices in Latin America, it contributed to relaying the discourse and implementing the policies of the State Department in the region. The ORIT was narrowly related to this process. Controlled by US unions or their allies in Latin America (mostly corporatist unions)<sup>2</sup>, it supported US interventions across the continent to counter the emergence of left-wing forces and governments. During the period when the AFL-CIO had withdrawn from the ICFTU, due to the latter's strong critique of the US government, it remained fully involved in ORIT, showing the strategic importance of this organization for US policy in Latin America. Former ORIT's General Secretary, Luis Anderson, is known for both having maintained the traditional line and accepting some changes following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Indeed, one can expect that the fall of the USSR and 'red fear' has changed the situation and thus the Americas could work as a magnifying glass to those interested in the impact of the end of the Cold War on ILMOs. Moreover, the end of corporatist regimes in Latin America made many Latin American trade unions free from their old allegiances, hence contributing to their independent participation into these international organizations.

Also, the Americas have been heavily affected by the rise of neoliberal globalization. A continent where some of the most powerful economies of the world coexist with some of the poorest and a number of 'emerging' countries, it is home to a number of dynamics related to the new international division of labour and to the North-South cleavage. Furthermore, several regional free trade agreements, from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to the Mercado Comun del Sur (MERCOSUR) to the aborted Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) have been signed or projected. These agreements are, to a lot of extent, regional consequences of neoliberal globalization and can thus be used to verify hypotheses related to this phenomenon. There again, the Americas are a relevant geographical frame which to study the impact of neoliberal globalization on ILMOs.

All of these considerations indicate that a research agenda on the international labour movement in the Americas should be driven by the

question, “how have the end of the Cold War and the rise of neoliberal globalization affected ILMOs in the Americas?”

## EXPLORING HYPOTHESES

Most work done on ILMOs’ dynamics could be classified as either ‘enthusiastic’ or ‘sceptical’. The former group, mostly composed of authors from Industrial Relations, praises ILMOs for being tools of organization for workers in the globalization era, in particular through initiatives like GFAs (Anner et al. 2006, Hammer 2005, Lillie 2004). The latter group (‘sceptics’) denies the ability of ‘old labour internationalism’ to represent such a hope for workers and prefer to focus its efforts on ‘grassroots’ initiatives and informal networks, labelled as ‘new internationalism’ (Waterman 2001, Moody 1997, Eder 2002).

Although both approaches are interesting, both tend to overlook, for different reasons, ILMOs. The ‘enthusiasts’ merely reflect ILMOs’ official line and prefer to focus their attention on strategic ‘innovations’ in a globalized economy. The ‘sceptics’ reject ILMOs for being too bureaucratic and too far from their members’ interests. This last point can hardly be denied. By nature, international organizations, whether they are formed of states or other actors, are further away from their members than domestic organizations. Also, it is long established that, at every level of activity, labour organizations often suffer from the ‘iron rule of oligarchy’ which leads to the creation of a small group of leaders, separated from the rank and file members by a bureaucracy (Michels 1962).

My position is that ILMOs should be seriously studied because they represent a substantial part of the heritage of labour internationalism and one of the visible answers to the globalization of the production process. Nevertheless, just like any socio-political actor, they are not simple organizations and should therefore be approached in a dialectical way. This means in a way that would identify tensions or even contradictions emerging from their behaviour as complex organizations, and avoid putting simplistic labels on ILMOs or their affiliates.

## ILMO’S POLITICAL PROJECT

The creation of a new, unified, international labour confederation raises enthusiasm among both the ICFTU and the WCL (ICFTU 2006) but also among non-affiliated union centres (e.g. the French Communist-leaning *Confédération générale du travail* - CGT). Indeed, the rhetoric of ‘unity’ has always been central to the labour movement. The idea that workers should, precisely, ‘unite’ in a single organization is supported by all trade union movements, even in countries where union pluralism exists. Also, those who considered the ICFTU-WFTU conflict as a ‘wrong’ or even ‘absurd’ debate (Moody 1997, Gallin 2002) praise the

fact that the end of the Cold War would free political ILMOs from their respective 'political supervisors'.

Nevertheless, O'Brien (2000b) underlines how the end of the Cold War also represents a challenge for ILMOs. The collapse of the USSR withdrew an important argument from social-democrats in the West. During the Cold War, they could promote their progressive agendas using the 'threat' of Communism if capitalism was not 'humanized'. Now that the Eastern bloc is gone and that Welfare states have been criticized for their failures, social-democrats in general and labour unions in particular are looking for a new project. This dilemma also exists at the international level, leading some observers to call for a 'politicization' of ILMOs (Gallin 2002). This task will be all the more challenging in the context of the new international confederation where a number of different 'families' are going to coexist: traditionally anticommunist ICFTU members (e.g. the AFL-CIO), social-Christian unions from the WCL (e.g. the Belgian *Confédération des syndicats chrétiens*) or new affiliates, often close to communist parties (e.g. the Brazilian CUT, the Confederation of South African Trade Unions or the French CGT).

These tensions are also present in the Americas. First of all, the ICFTU-ORIT and the WCL-Central Latinoamericana de Trabajadores (CLAT), which should logically merge with the creation of the new international confederation, do not have the same traditions, neither in terms of political orientations nor in terms of structures. Indeed, although the alignment of the ORIT on Washington is well-known and still reflected in the fact that it is headed by the Vice-President of the AFL-CIO, the CLAT has maintained a purely Latin-American structure, close to the left of the Catholic Church and to 'liberation theology' (Jakobsen 2001).

Furthermore, ORIT saw new members joining its ranks even before the scheduled merger with the WCL. For example, the Québec *Confédération des syndicats nationaux* (CSN, formerly affiliated to the WCL) and the Brazilian CUT (formerly non-affiliated) both joined in the 1990s. Hence, the Americas and more particularly the ORIT are relevant frameworks in which to study the issues related to the creation of the new international confederation. Although definitely a sign of unification of the international labour movement, the creation of a new international also reveals tensions around the question of political orientations, and more broadly underlines the crisis of organized labour's political project.

## **MERGERS BETWEEN GUFs**

Mergers are a strategic shift adopted by ILMOs to adapt to globalization. But the experience of similar mergers between national unions led to considerable tensions between them caused, among other things, by competition

to affiliate local unions. It has been proven, for instance, that some electricity workers' unions were approached by both UNI and ICEM, whereas they were already affiliated to another GUF (Gagnon et al. 2006). Also, the relative 'weakness' of the ICFTU as a structure and the historical autonomy of GUFs vis-à-vis the ICFTU might lead to additional tensions if multi-sectoral GUFs planned to become more 'political' than 'sectoral'. The recent communication campaign launched by UNI in order to appear as 'my global union' for its individual members (UNI 2005) is another indication of this tendency.

Finally, the internal cohesion of these mergers can be questioned. The fact that both ICEM and UNI keep an internal structure reflecting the various sectors present among their membership (UNI 2006b, ICEM 2006) can be both interpreted as a will to stay close to the different sectoral realities and as a sign of internal division. Hence, mergers between GUFs and the creation of multi-sectoral GUFs, as consequences of the evolution of the production process and particularly of neoliberal globalization, led to both a better relation of force and to internal tensions. Both ICEM and UNI have a number of affiliates and even continental structures in the Americas (Collombat 2005) that can constitute a good framework for verifying this hypothesis.

## ILMOS' REGIONALIZATION

ILMOs were founded and for a long time largely confined to Western Europe (Hyman 2005a, Harrod and O'Brien 2002, Jakobsen 2001). Hence the question of their capacity to reach unions beyond Europe and to grant power to non-European members is central to their post-Cold-War development. Indeed most of the new members of the future international confederation will come from the global South (former WCL, WFTU or non-affiliated members). To that end, serious consideration needs to be given to ILMOs' regional structures. According to ILMOs' official discourses, regional organizations contribute to get closer to the affiliates' realities and, eventually, to decentralize some of the decision-making power (UNI 2006a, ICEM 2005, ORIT 2006).

Nevertheless, decentralization/regionalization is not a uniform concept. As underlined by Gallin (2002) distinctions have to be made between resources and decisions. For Gallin, decisions should be decentralized contrary to resources that should be centralized in order to consolidate ILMOs' funds. Also, granting power to a regional structure does not necessarily guarantee its democratic functioning (Collombat 2005). In the Americas, the historical weight of the AFL-CIO in the ORIT and the place given to other countries in the organization still need to be studied. It is even truer of panamerican structures of GUFs, on which almost no work exists.

Hence, the issue of ILMOs' regionalization in the Americas should be tackled along two axes. First, what is the relationship among ILMOs and their

regional organizations in the Americas? Are the latter really autonomous or is Euro-centrism still the dominant pattern? To what extent has the end of the Cold War changed this relationship? Second is the question of the balance of power inside ILMOs' regional organizations in the Americas. Is the AFL-CIO still the 'regional hegemon' it was during the Cold War? What is the role played by new members coming from Latin America and often from more radical political backgrounds?

The efforts of regionalization are obvious but the historical weight of both European organizations among ILMOs and the AFL-CIO among ORIT lead me to propose that ILMOs' regionalization in the Americas does move decision-making closer to the affiliates but fails to erase the historical inequalities between the affiliates.

### **A CRITICAL IPE APPROACH**

Among the different theoretical approaches, critical international political economy (IPE) is a promising tool to analyze ILMOs in the Americas. Critical IPE is a theoretical tradition that considers work and labour as highly political phenomena and that is mainly interested in the capacity of workers to act as agents of social change (see Murphy and Douglas 2001, Palan 2000). Rooted in Marx's historical materialism, critical IPE has evolved along the 20th century, in particular under the influence of Gramsci's work. Cox (1987) and Harrod (1987) both updated Gramsci's work by highlighting the role of workers and social forces in the creation of and resistance to world order. That is why I believe this tradition is relevant to the study of ILMOs' dynamics, although insights from other currents and disciplines will contribute to enrich the analysis.

Nevertheless, O'Brien (2000a) has underlined how IPE has somehow given up organized labour as a central concern. Not only did critical IPE authors turned to other topics (following a similar tendency observed in the study of national labour movements) but also the academic discipline of Industrial Relations almost monopolized trade unions as object of research, at least in North America and Britain. Although some (British) Industrial Relations scholars identified with the 'labour process approach' can be considered as critical theorists (Knights and Willmott 1990), the mainstream of the discipline is clearly business-oriented (see Gagnon 1991). Even when critical, these authors almost always stay at the firm/local level and hardly provide holistic approaches.

The role of neoliberalism in the weakening of organized labour position in relation to the state and employers, have been developed and discussed by several neo-Marxist authors, in particular those identified with neo-Gramscianism (e.g. Panitch and Gindin 2003, Bakker and Gill 2003, Gill 2002, Panitch and Leys 2001). Updating the work of Gramsci, these authors link neoliberalism with notions of imperialism and hegemony to explain how capital

manages to impose its will through both coercion and consent. These authors also point to linkages between capital and key states, specifically the US. This last point is of particular importance to an analysis of the situation in the Americas. The US state and labour movement cannot be considered in the same fashion as 'peripheral' countries like Canada, Mexico and Brazil. Researchers have detailed how the latest development of capitalism is driven by fragmentation of the capitalist class (van der Pijl 1997, Overbeek 2004). The main contribution of these authors is not to take capital as a homogenous bloc and to underline the importance of the relation between technological developments, different modes of production and concepts of control. Similarly, the labour movement must not be treated as homogenous as there are multiple divisions and specific contexts identified.

There remains an imbalance in critical IPE research: it focuses on processes of neoliberalism without significant focus on workers and their institutions (see critiques by Overbeek 2000 and Drainville 1994). Therefore, Harrod's (2002) call for an International Political Economy of Labour (IPEL) is all the more necessary and could be usefully articulated to other efforts to approach globalization (Munck 2002) and union renewal (Kumar and Schenk 2006, Yates 2005, Cranford and Ladd 2003). Also, it should be bridged with works coming from critical geographers whose use of the concept of scale has contributed to a better understanding of the labour movement's capacity to respond to globalization at the international (Castree et al. 2004, Wills 2002), national (Wills 1998) and local level (Herod 1998).

A specific critical IPE project on ILMOs in the Americas would test the hypotheses drawn out earlier through precise indicators. Political dissensions between North and South could be identified by investigating their respective positions on topics like free trade, merger between CLAT and ORIT, internal democracy or relation to the state. A comparison with ILMOs' positions on such topics would give an indication of the respective weights of the different affiliates. An analysis of the evolution of ILMO's structures (composition of the staff and officers, localization of the offices, repartition of the funding) will also contribute to verify these hypotheses. Considering the strategic dimension of trade unions discourse, information gathered through interviews and official documentation should be critically analyzed and understood in the specific political context of each studied country.

The qualitative nature of such a project would call for a selection of cases to be made out of the 11 potential ILMOs and 35 potential countries. As the case of the United States is so specific, considering the central role of its labour movement in the dynamics going on in the Americas, it will necessarily appear across the research and could be 'balanced' by another Northern perspective, i.e. Canada. As for Latin America, Mexico and Brazil are two obvious choices considering their respective economic weights and the fact that they represent



two types of post-authoritarian unionisms. Finally, in addition to ORIT, two GUFs could be chosen. UNI, as representative of the newly founded, multi-sectoral and service sector federations, and IMF as representative of the oldest, industry-specific, manufacturing sector federations, would be two relevant picks.

Hence, this project would contribute to the advancement of a broader research agenda in the Americas and of a critical mapping of the post-Cold War dynamics of the international labour movement in the neoliberal era. Providing an analysis of the contradictions and tensions existing inside unions and among the labour movement is indeed necessary. It will not only enrich the academic literature on the topic but also help unionists to think critically about their practices in an era when the very idea of collective representation of workers is challenged on a daily basis.

## NOTES

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1. I refer here to the distinction between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' patterns of union development identified by Lipset (1960). He illustrates the 'top-down' model using the United Steelworkers of America and the 'bottom-up' using the United Auto Workers.
2. From 1961 to 1989, ORIT's headquarters were located within the very building of the corporatist CTM in Mexico City.

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